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ABSTRACT

The year-long Lighthouse District Planning Process culminated in the development of a plan that addresses the needs of at-risk students in the Burlington School District and the Orleans Southwest Supervisory Union in Vermont. This final report on the project also serves as a guide that can be used by other districts to construct a comprehensive approach to serving their own at-risk students. Section 1 presents brief case studies of each Lighthouse district. The cases are presented in a way that highlights the process undertaken by each district as well as the plan each devised. Section 2 presents an analysis of how the process worked in the two different settings, urban and rural, including how varying community contexts play a role in shaping outcomes. Section 3 is a Practice Profile of the Lighthouse District Planning Process. This tool will be most valuable to communities that are attempting to integrate measures to assist at-risk youth into the priorities and plans of the school district as well as the larger communities. The components of the planning process outlined in this report can apply to system-wide changes as well as changes only for at-risk students. (JS)

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The Vermont Lighthouse School District Project

Comprehensive Planning for At-Risk Youth

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The Vermont Lighthouse School District Project: Comprehensive Planning for At-Risk Youth

1990

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INTRODUCTION

In June 1988, the Vermont Department of Education initiated a small grant project called the "Lighthouse School District Project for Developing Comprehensive Services for At-Risk Youth." For good reason it soon became known simply as the "Lighthouse Project."

The project was premised on what seemed to be a good idea to a Department task force applying for a dropout prevention grant from the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) in Washington, D.C. The idea was, wouldn't it be nice if a couple of divergent Vermont school districts could develop comprehensive plans for meeting the needs of all children at risk of school failure, preschool through grade twelve. The resulting plans and, more importantly, process could then be written up and provide a "shining beacon" to other districts around the state interested in meeting the needs of their at-risk students.

Vermont was awarded the dropout prevention grant from CCSSO, which included $15,000 for the Lighthouse Project. The challenge then became one of quickly giving substance to a good idea and selecting school districts to participate.

In July two districts, the Burlington School District and the Orleans Southwest Supervisory Union (centered in Hardwick), were selected as the Lighthouse districts. The first represents the most urban area of the state, an area experiencing low unemployment and a high rate of economic growth. The second is a large rural district serving six towns. The area is among the most economically depressed in the state and lacks easy access to community health and social services.

The process for the Lighthouse Project was an evolutionary one. It began with the districts forming cross-representational leadership teams to

- define the problem of at-risk youth,
- scan the environment of current school and community circumstances, and
- develop resulting goals, objectives, and strategies for meeting the needs of the district's at-risk youth.

This process was a mirror of one concurrently undertaken by a state-level team called the Vermont Policy Team on Dropout Prevention.

The district teams dedicated a considerable number of hours to create credible and "marketable" plans. Along the way they came together for five, full-day, joint sessions to exchange ideas and plans and to further define and develop the Lighthouse process. Valuable technical assistance to the teams' work was also provided by Janet Phlegar of The Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands.

This publication serves as a greatly condensed final report of the year-long Lighthouse District Planning Process and, more importantly, as a guide that can be used by other districts to

construct a comprehensive approach to serving their own at-risk students*. It contains three major sections:

- The first presents brief case studies of each Lighthouse district. These case studies were constructed from the districts' final reports and a series of observations and interviews with participants conducted by Lois Holbrook of The Regional Laboratory. The cases are presented in such a way as to highlight the process undertaken by each district as well as the plan each devised.

- This is followed by an analysis of how the process worked in the two different settings, including how varying community contexts play a role in shaping outcomes.

- The final section is a Practice Profile of the Lighthouse District Planning Process. This tool will be most valuable to communities that are attempting to integrate measures to assist at-risk youth into the priorities and plans of the school district as well as the larger communities.

As we rethink what our schools should be and how they can help all students reach their potential, we are spurred to action by considering how many students have been unable to benefit from schools as they are today. These students remind us of the inadequacies in our current systems and institutions: our schools, families, communities, and service agencies.

This report can also be useful in school improvement efforts that go beyond planning for those most at risk. It views the school as one component of a larger system of services, both formal and informal. Since school touches every child's life, it is a critical aspect of enabling all students to reach their full potential, academically, developmentally, and emotionally. To better benefit all students -- those at risk and those currently achieving but not being well prepared for productive lives in the twenty-first century -- schools need to change. Because schools are part of the larger system, such changes have wide ranging implications. The components of the planning process outlined in this report can apply to system wide changes. By substituting the words "all students" for "at risk students," a school or district can use the Practice Profile in a broader restructuring effort.

The participants of this project should be commended for their commitment to solving the myriad of issues and concerns facing students at risk of school failure. I believe that the result of their work, both in process and in substance is, in fact, a shining beacon from which teachers, administrators, and community members around Vermont can benefit substantially as they work toward improving the personal and educational outcomes of young people at risk.

Rich Tulikangas
Lighthouse Project Coordinator

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*The full length reports of the districts are available from each district or the Vermont Department of Education.

THE VERMONT LIGHTHOUSE DISTRICT PROJECT
PROFILES

The following profiles of the two Lighthouse districts provide an overview of the processes they employed to meet the needs of their students at risk of school failure. The steps they followed parallel the components of the Practice Profile of the Vermont Lighthouse District Planning Process, a discussion of which can be found in the final section of this report.

BURLINGTON

Burlington is a college and commerce community of 40,000 residents; the immediate area, urban by Vermont standards, has a population of 130,000. Burlington's diverse population has increasing numbers of college students, elderly, and poor, and an overall population that is increasing slightly after a greater than 10 percent outmigration during the last two decades. Unemployment in Burlington is at an all-time low, with plentiful construction and entry-level service jobs.

The Burlington School System includes seven elementary schools, two middle schools, one high school, and an alternative, off campus, secondary program for youth who are emotionally disturbed. The district also offers special education (birth to age 21), Chapter 1 (grades 1-12), an alternative middle school program for motivated students (applicants are selected based on motivation rather than talent or grades), new programs for at-risk students at one middle school and the high school, plus a general support program at the high school that allows students credit for volunteer experience in the school and the community, as well as for any tutorial assistance they might need.

In 1987-88, an Alternative Education Committee identified 235 of Burlington's 3502 students as at risk of school failure and recommended programs to meet the needs of students with special learning requirements. A program to meet the needs of at-risk students had been established at one middle school during 1987-88, and an at-risk program at the high school began during the 1988-89 school year. Both continued to operate simultaneously with the Lighthouse Project. The political climate of the city is supportive of meeting the needs of diverse student populations; the Mayor's Youth Council and Teen Center and the Parks and Recreation Departments run programs that benefit at-risk youth.

Burlington defines at-risk students as those:

- who are likely to drop out of school as soon as they are sixteen;
- with poor attendance, poor education, and/or poor work motivation;
- with emotional disturbance;
- who lack goals; and/or
- with poor self-esteem, poor environments with little support or concern from family or friends, and/or poor social skills.

Burlington's Planning Process

> *We tried to include people from many areas -- we depended on the individuals involved to bring their team-building experience to the group. The knowledge base varied widely among the team members, but the varied input was useful.*
>
> Lighthouse team chair

The steps of the Lighthouse District Planning Process are listed below, with a brief discussion of Burlington's activities and learnings at each step of the process.

1. Convene a representative planning team. Burlington's planning team included people with direct contact with at-risk students and those with some influence to implement change: the Assistant Director of Special Education, high school and middle school administrators, elementary and middle school guidance counselors, a school board member, three people from the district's alternative programs, an elementary teacher, and the director of a community agency. Some of these team members were added after the original team had met several times.

Learnings: Appropriate representation is more important than size. A larger overall group makes smaller work groups possible, which can make individuals' work loads more manageable. Adding team members after the group has already begun work is time consuming and difficult. Membership should include direct teaching and support staff, administrators, one or more representatives from each school building, the school board, and a community agency; the team should encourage input from at-risk students.

2. Develop a shared vision of the Lighthouse Project and where and how it fits in the district. The Burlington team's guiding questions were: How do we build on the work that's already been done? And how will what we decide to do now influence what is happening two years from now? They decided to continue with the work that the 1987-88 Alternative Education Committee had initiated and focused their activities on strengthening the existing system by coordinating current programs for at-risk students, identifying gaps in service, and filling those gaps.

Learnings: Where substantial groundwork has been laid prior to a current team's efforts, the team must recognize that there's a fine line between respecting that prior work and compromising its own values, goals, and opinions. Fitting a new plan into an ongoing operation, especially one with expanded goals, is difficult and time consuming and may not be "visionary."

3. Assess needs, including a scan of the larger environment. The 1987-88 Alternative Education Committee had conducted a needs assessment through a district-wide survey to identify students at risk of school failure, which was completed by the administration in each school. The Lighthouse Project used these data and recommendations. The recommendations included improving the existing building-based support teams, the case management system, and the curriculum in current at-risk programs, as well as planning for parent involvement.

Learnings: It is important to collect data from a variety of sources. School records such as attendance, behavior reports, success rates in basic studies, health profiles, and out of school information from community agencies, such as Social and Rehabilitation Services referrals, mental health and counseling services, Vocational Rehabilitation, and Probation/Parole court records may provide valuable information. Given a short time frame, the following strategy can move a group toward action relatively quickly: Determine which students are in need of services and what services are currently available, then identify what services should be added or improved to better meet student needs. This strategy may be limiting, however, if a team's goal is a broader-based restructuring to improve student outcomes rather than adding to existing services.

4. Develop goals, objectives, and strategies for addressing the problems of at-risk children and youth; pull these together into a plan. The Burlington Lighthouse Team addressed the following objectives during the 1988-89 school year:

- to develop a comprehensive plan for coordinated services for students at risk, K-12;
- to strengthen existing coordination with support services and community agencies;
- to plan and provide for staff development for classroom teachers as well as special services personnel; and
- to increase parent and teacher involvement and training in working/living with youngsters at risk of school failure.

Strategies for meeting these objectives during the Lighthouse Project included building a strong staff development effort and using outside resources, such as The Regional Laboratory, for additional information.

Learnings: Non-team members, such as teachers and community agency staff, should be involved in planning for curriculum and coordination and providing inservice training and support for teachers in building-based support teams. District and state resources, as well as outside resources, can provide valuable information and support. Visits to other programs that are addressing the same problems can be especially useful. A clear view of how and where the plan fits with other school district priorities, as well as strong administrative and school board support, all contribute to making plans become realities. To develop an overall, comprehensive plan involving substantial district change, two years might be a more realistic time frame than the one year provided for in the Lighthouse Project. It is also important to begin some activities that move toward the goals at the same time as the team proceeds with the planning effort.

5. Communicate and build support for the Lighthouse Plan. After adding some new members, the Lighthouse Team involved a wide range of people and interests. The Lighthouse Plan thus increased the advocacy base for students at risk of school failure. The year-long process included input at many stages from many diverse groups and individuals. By the end of the Lighthouse Project year, the team was prepared to present to the Burlington School Board its action plan and recommendations for at-risk students, as well as a series of "next steps" to keep their Lighthouse beacon burning.

Learnings: Long-term impact should be kept in mind as an overarching goal. Answers to the question "How will what we decide to do now influence what is happening two (or five or ten) years from now?" help to keep long-term goals in sight. By working collaboratively with appropriate groups and individuals during the planni.g process, the group can assure continuing cooperation. A concrete action plan for moving forward addresses funding and support issues, as well as specific curricular recommendations, and the focus should include the larger issue of overall improvement for all students.

> *The most satisfying aspects are the tangible results of our work that will affect the district. We pulled things together within the district.*
>
> Team Summary

> *[The Lighthouse Project was worthwhile because i]t gave us the incentive to pull together the separate pieces already in place, and to know what further work needs to be done. It helped us recognize how many resources we have in the Burlington community and schools. It brought continuing life to this priority set by the board and administration last year. The Lighthouse Project enabled us to do what will be productive for our district by encouraging us to plan well.*
>
> Team Summary

According to team members, what will the Burlington School District look like if the Lighthouse Plan is allowed to move towards its goals?

- Drop out rates will decrease.
- School services will be better coordinated with community agencies.
- More case managers/student advocates will be in the schools.
- Intervention will begin earlier.
- More counseling will be available to students and families through community mental health agencies.
- Social and Rehabilitation Services caseworkers will be assigned to schools, assuring more continuity for students.
- Transition services between elementary and middle school will be improved.
- Curriculum will be more challenging for all students.
- The community and the school district will work together more closely.

ORLEANS SOUTHWEST SUPERVISORY UNION

The Orleans Southwest Supervisory Union (OSSU) is located at the juncture of four northern counties that cover 1832 square miles. The school district, which is made up of six towns, covers almost a hundred square miles and has a population of 5935. Each of the towns is experiencing growth.

Human services are spread out over the four counties, which lack public transportation. Of the five mandated state human services (Social and Rehabilitation Services, Social Welfare, Public Health, Probation/Parole, and Vocational Rehabilitation), none are located in any of the district's six towns. The entire district is in an economically depressed area. In the largest town in the district, the average annual income is $6898. There is little industry in the area, but many people are self-employed in fields such as farming, contracting, auto repair, and as restaurant owners. Almost 20 percent of area residents have less than an eighth-grade education.

Five of the towns have elementary schools, and students in the sixth town are tuitioned to a neighboring school. There are two secondary schools in the supervisory union. The OSSU offers Chapter 1, some special education and guidance/counseling services, an early education initiative, and two new jobs programs (begun in 1988) for high school students.

One of the high schools has a cumulative (grades 9-12) dropout rate of 27 percent; the other, 13 percent. The Union is committed to effectively meeting the needs of students who are at risk of educational failure by dropping out of school or marginally completing school with poor grades and lacking skills necessary for productive employment.

However, the vast geographic area with scattered populations, the lack of adequate community mental health and social services, and the lack of trained, specialized personnel (psychologists, pediatricians, occupational and physical therapists, etc.) all serve to compound the problem of serving students who are at risk of not completing school.

The Orleans Southwest Supervisory Union defines at-risk students as those:

- with handicapping conditions placed outside or in the district;
- with poor grades, only marginally completing school;
- who plan to or have dropped out of school;
- who are socially deprived due to rural isolation;
- who are economically deprived or living in poverty; and/or
- who have been retained or are working one or more grades below their expected level.

The Orleans Southwest Supervisory Union's Planning Process

> *The planning process works when the right blend of people come together with good leadership -- the group will make change happen.*
>
> Team Member, Classroom Teacher

The steps of the Lighthouse District Planning Process are listed below, with a brief description of OSSU's activities and learnings at each step of this process.

1. Convene a representative planning team. The OSSU chose to base its team on district-wide, comprehensive representation, a broad-based group whose members brought interest, leadership skills, experience, communication skills, and knowledge of the community. A district facilitator or chair was identified; administrators both participated and nominated teacher participants; interested volunteers were welcome. A member of the District Planning Committee (which oversees the direction of the school district), teachers (elementary, secondary, Chapter 1, special education/early education), a guidance counselor, and a principal represented the school district. The community was represented by a parent, and the business sector, by two members. A 1987-88 school year committee involved with developing a cooperative educational program with local businesses and developing an educational program for students with disabilities and intensive learning needs was also represented.

Learnings: If the success of a project depends upon the interrelated efforts of home, school, business, and community, then the design of the project must involve the active participation of representatives of all those sectors. Appropriate representation is more important than size. Membership in the Lighthouse Team requires a tremendous commitment of time, thought, and energy. Including committed, interested people is therefore vital. Substitute teachers are needed for teachers released from the classroom to serve on the committee. A strong leader or facilitator is important, but the work must be done by the group (or sub-groups) and by consensus. Each person's ideas and suggestions must be valued.

2. Develop a shared vision of the Lighthouse Project and where and how it fits in the district. The Orleans Southwest Supervisory Union follows a research-based, outcomes driven school development model, with the following mission statement: "We will provide the opportunity for ALL students to acquire the exit skills and behaviors as established. We will provide a climate that will enable ALL within to achieve their maximum potential." The OSSU's mission statement was a driving force in the direction of the Lighthouse Project work. The team used a group process model near the beginning of the project to help in team building/team process. A guiding question of the Lighthouse team became: "What can we do as a community to reduce the numbers dropping out of school?" The Lighthouse Project was designed as a comprehensive restructuring of the educational process. It builds on the strengths, encourages the involvement, addresses the needs, and meshes the roles of children, parents, teachers, business, and the community at large.

Learnings: Extensive personal and group preparation is important. If the foundation for work is not in place, team members need broad-based information. Early on, outside assistance in team building/team process is valuable. It became evident as the work progressed that the key to this project was managing change through a group process. Existing district mission and

goals, as well as the proposed focus of the team, need to be laid out so that the team can see the "big picture" and how the components fit. A planning model or "road map" would help in defining and carrying out the planning process.

3. Assess needs, including a scan of the larger environment. The Lighthouse Team analyzed local, state, and national data. At the local level, the following information was collected and analyzed: high school dropout rates, retention statistics, school and community resources data (recreational, social, and cultural offerings and special programs), employment statistics, economic information and demographic data, and availability and location of human services. A comparison of the schools within the district was made, focusing on resources, staffing, politics, organization, policies, and funding. The team reviewed state and federal literature and research and attended conferences on the dropout problem. Input was solicited from all sectors of the community and school, including administrators, teachers, specialists, board of education members, parents, students, business people, and other members of the community.

Learnings: Vital information includes high school dropout and retention statistics, school and community resources data, extensive school analysis data, employment statistics, socioeconomic and demographic data, information on human services, and current research on dropouts and school restructuring. Team members can divide the tasks of data gathering and then sort and consolidate information through group process and guidance from workshops and other forms of technical assistance. Visually "charting out" available services in each town of the district, or the distance from available services, can highlight the fragmentation and lack of service coordination that might exist. The economic situation of an area influences the employment options, and in OSSU, a poor economic climate increases the risk that students won't find productive and fulfilling employment, even if they do graduate from high school.

4. Develop goals, objectives, and strategies for addressing problems of at risk children and youth; pull these together into a plan. The OSSU Lighthouse Team addressed the following goals during the 1988-89 school year:

- to promote a nurturing and supportive environment, both intellectual and emotional, which values students, parents, teachers, and administrators and assures professional sharing within the school, the district, and the community;

- to provide a humanistic, multi-faceted process by which all children's needs are identified and met through a child-centered, research-based, personalized curriculum which emphasizes decision-making and problem-solving skills;

- to give all teachers the skills and knowledge to teach all students, recognizing diverse educational processes;

- to have schools that reflect the needs, perceptions, and visions of students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community members; to provide sustained opportunities for all members of the community to participate in their ongoing educational development;

- to build school, district, and community ownership by developing a strong communication process -- both initial and ongoing -- with teachers, parents, businesses, and community and maintaining a shared leadership model; and

- to conduct ongoing analysis related to environmental data and based on research; to carry out continual program evaluation and revision.

The plan assumes that restructuring the schools must be included. Consequently, it is a long-term, long-range process requiring a long-term commitment. The comprehensive plan details short- and long-term goals to be implemented and evaluated over a five-year period.

Learnings: As the Lighthouse Project evolved, it became evident that the plan had to be multi-faceted in order to be successful. The proposed goals, objectives, and strategies needed to have a wide focus on more effective teaching and organizing of the schools, in order to benefit all students in the district. It is the group's conclusion that the solution to the dropout problem must involve the cooperative and integrated effort of home, school, business, and community. The solution is not of a singular, isolated nature. The project design must be broad-based and comprehensive, and the change process to get there must be equally comprehensive.

5. Communicate and build support for the Lighthouse Plan. The Lighthouse Team disseminated information frequently to maintain awareness and to gather input. Meetings were open to the public, and one meeting specifically included several community members and the press, resulting in a newspaper article about the Lighthouse Project. Team members participated in professional workshops, conferences, and forums. The Executive Board of the OSSU was kept informed of the team's work, although the local school boards were not. An open community meeting was held to inform and, more importantly, solicit assistance and input from the community. Parents, business leaders, and community residents were contacted through a written invitation as well as a personal phone call. The meeting involved a brief panel discussion, followed by general discussion and a question and answer period. By the end of the Lighthouse year, the team had a five-year plan, a strategy for applying for new program funding, and targeted areas for future attention. The team will continue in a leadership role, along with the administration, in order to follow through on implementation, evaluation, and modification of the plan, as needed.

Learnings: Soliciting the input of all groups and keeping them informed helped build knowledge of and support for the plan. This support is necessary because the plan will be implemented through the cooperative efforts of the home, school, business, and community. These groups and individuals should be informed during the planning process and should receive a completed plan. A communication plan is needed in order to keep general and school communities informed about the process and progress of the team. Meetings should be open to the public. Communication within the team itself is critical for success. Brainstorming, focus groups, discussion, development, and ultimately, consensus among the group for the Plan happened only through intensive team process and communication.

> *The most satisfying aspect? It worked. We got community involvement -- both potential and actual.*
>
> Team Summary

According to team members, what will the Orleans Southwest Supervisory Union District look like if the Lighthouse Plan is allowed to move toward its goals?

- The community will be more aware of children's needs.
- The schools/community will be more flexible to better meet those needs.
- New ways to educate children will be in place.
- Students will have a wider range of learning options.
- Dropout rates will decrease.
- Fewer students will repeat grades.
- Parents will be more involved in the education process.
- School climate can be measured.
- Students and teachers will be happier to be in school.
- Heterogeneous grouping will be used successfully.
- Case management plans will be in place.
- Each town will have a center-based Essential Early Education program.
- Child Care Centers will be in place, under community initiative.
- Schools will remain small.
- Schools will be safe havens for students.
- The transition from elementary to middle school will be smooth.
- Education will once again be valued by the community.
- School will be seen as a place that helps people.

THREE IMPORTANT COMMUNITY FACTORS THAT SHAPE THE DEVELOPMENT AND OUTCOMES OF THE LIGHTHOUSE DISTRICT PLANNING PROCESS

The profiles of Burlington and Orleans Southwest Supervisory Union provide an overview of how two different communities faced the challenge of planning to meet the needs of at-risk students. The Vermont Department of Education selected two different types of communities, rural and urban, to determine if factors related to population density might create some fundamentally different circumstances that would affect the formulation and outcomes of the process.

The cross-site analysis that comprises this section of the report was undertaken to determine if, in fact, the degree of ruralness or urbanness did have a significant impact on the planning process or in the resulting plan, as well as to identify any other community context variables that might account for significant distinctions. Since each community differs from others in many of its dimensions -- demographics, financial base, developed resources, existence of and investment in ongoing programs, political atmosphere, and general attitude toward education, to name a few -- which factors had a critical or fundamental impact on the Lighthouse District Planning Process in the two communities involved?

The key findings of this analysis are that there are three interacting variables that emerged as most salient in our comparison of the process and the outcomes of the Lighthouse District Planning Process in the two sites:

- rural/urban nature of the district;
- degree of investment in or commitment to existing plans, structures, and services; and
- perceived magnitude of problem and degree of perceived need for change.

While we discuss each of these separately, they are interacting, overlapping variables rather than three discrete influences. One challenge in analyzing something as dynamic as a "live" community and its change process is to present findings clearly, yet in a way that acknowledges the interaction of the elements.

Rural/Urban Nature of the District

The larger and more urban the community, like Burlington, the more diverse and numerous the people and organizations likely to have an interest in at-risk children. In addition, the more resources a community has, the more highly developed each of the various resources might be. For example, schools in such a community are likely to offer or have access to more social services, some for very specific populations. A few overlapping services may actually compete for clients, but certainly most "needs" will be covered somewhere.

The existence of social services and the presence of specific advocacy groups reflect an awareness that there are populations with varying needs in the community, all of which should be reflected in the school's overall agenda. In such urban areas, the schools have had many years of experience in considering the needs of diverse students and have enacted many

programs and school structures to accommodate various of these students over the years. However, if there is no central case manager or services are not well coordinated, students may "play off" the various service providers and avoid having their needs met.

In resource poor rural areas such as Orleans Southwest Supervisory Union, some services are actually not provided within the "community" at all, and transportation difficulties prevent at-risk youth from traveling to obtain services. Many rural schools are in supervisory unions comprising different communities that do not identify with each other and do not have coordinated services. There are gaps in services rather than overlapping services. This was certainly the case in the Orleans Southwest Supervisory Union.

In addition, many rural school districts have been used to dealing with a more homogeneous population, or a population that is perceived as homogeneous. While they offer specific programs and a "comprehensive high school curriculum," the numbers of students who press for or need options other than those offered is small. Rural communities that lack resources and numbers have financial difficulty in accommodating unusual circumstances.

The different realities that may exist in urban and rural communities can have a profound influence on both the commitment to existing services and the perceived need for change. While, in general, urban communities have a higher percentage of services than do rural ones, it is conceivable that an urban area could have a broad panoply of services, yet few or none that are effective in meeting student needs. This hypothetical urban community, then, could be failing to serve its students just as much as a rural community with few services in place.

Degree of Investment in or Commitment to Existing Plans, Structures, and Services

In some communities, particularly urban ones, many services may be already in place to meet the needs of at-risk youth. Certainly in Burlington there was a variety of existing and effective services, and a formal planning group had convened two years before the Lighthouse Project to recommend strategies to meet these students' needs. The recommendations of this group were being acted upon as the Lighthouse Project began, and this presented a dilemma for the Lighthouse team. How could they begin a planning process when one had been completed two years before and its recommendations were being implemented in the schools? Should the Lighthouse Project build on this previous work, or start over from a different perspective? Burlington had existing services and interventions, and the Lighthouse Project team decided to fill the gaps in these services and extend the interventions to more students, rather than to think fundamentally about whether those services and interventions were comprehensive or systemic enough to solve the major problems.

It is important to note here that the structure of the Lighthouse District Planning Process probably serves to keep districts that already have a broad array of services and interventions for students at risk within the confines of their existing arrangements. While the planning process asks a team to develop a vision about what an ideal comprehensive and integrated plan will look like as an early step, it suggests as the next step that the team conduct an assessment of needs and an "environmental scan" of current school and community circumstances. This leaves a district with many existing structures and programs in the likely position of assessing additional needs that aren't yet met as opposed to evaluating the effectiveness and comprehensiveness of what has been ongoing. It is also a natural, positive way to proceed, rather than risk criticism for wasting time redoing what had recently been completed. Finally,

in these times of short implementation timelines, policy shifts, and changing agendas, there is not much encouragement to fundamentally rethink an approach, as it is likely that a district will be caught in mid-stream without enough time or political support to finish the rebuilding.

Because the problem of significant numbers of students failing to gain from school what is critical to their futures is growing, as well as because little that has been done so far has been successful in making a true difference, it is worth pushing ourselves to carefully reconsider our approaches to students at risk in the most comprehensive way possible. This is true in both rural and urban areas. This gives urgency to the second component of the Lighthouse District Planning Process: envisioning an ideal comprehensive plan that is integrated into the overall district plan. And that district plan should have as its foundation improved outcomes for all students.

In contrast to Burlington, Orleans Southwest Supervisory Union had relatively few services or structures to meet the needs of students at risk. While this is generally understood to be a negative plight of poor rural areas, this circumstance freed the Lighthouse team to think of creative and more fundamental ways to reach the broad array of children's needs. Rural schools generally have the benefit of being more central to the life of the community, and those in the schools are well regarded. These factors helped Orleans think about new ways to connect the schools in the communities as well as new ways for teachers and other school personnel to interact with students and their families.

Perceived Magnitude of Problem and Degree of Perceived Need for Change

Both communities felt they had students who were failing to gain from school, some in serious ways and others who were "falling through the cracks." In Burlington, there was an acknowledgement that the range of student diversity was so great that some needs were not being met. On the other hand, many programs and opportunities for at-risk students were already in place, so the overall quotient of need was moderate. In Orleans there was acknowledged a high level of need due to the effects of rural poverty and low emphasis on educational attainment within the long-time resident population, as well as an influx of highly mobile newcomers. Overall the amount, nature, and availability of services were very limited. The result was a climate in which the district perceived high need and limited existing ways to meet the need, yielding a quotient of large magnitude of problem.

In communities with a variety of existing services there may be a feeling that, while some additional services might be needed, there is not an acute need for major restructuring. The solution to their problem may be seen as filling the gaps in service rather than rethinking the way to provide services. Burlington Lighthouse planners felt that only a relatively small group of at-risk students was not being provided for, and they planned services to meet their needs.

In other communities, particularly those with inadequate or ineffective services, there may be a greater sense of urgency and a profound perceived need for change of more magnitude. Orleans Southwest Supervisory Union, for example, acknowledged that they had a major problem meeting the needs of at-risk students and were providing very limited services. While planners were familiar with the variety of services the district needed, they recognized the area's lack of capacity to support those services in traditional modes. This opened them to try completely new approaches, constructing the system essentially from "ground zero." They also

broadened their goal from meeting the needs of at-risk students to meeting the needs of all students.

Summary

The number, variety, and effectiveness of existing services to meet student needs may be the key determinant that sets the direction of the Lighthouse District Planning Process. In many ways, it is easier to get a comprehensive view of a community's services when the community is not providing many. Planners may be more receptive to considering comprehensive, major changes when there are few existing services. It also may be more difficult to develop a comprehensive plan around existing services than it is to plan new programs. In general, the urban or rural nature of the community correlates highly with the number of services both within and beyond the school setting, with rural communities usually having fewer resources. However, the effectiveness and appropriateness of existing services must be considered, as these factors are ultimately more important than the number of services available.

Communities that have multiple existing services and structures designed to meet student needs and that continue to perceive themselves as having a problem with student outcomes should think beyond remedies for the at-risk population and consider restructuring to better reach optimal outcomes for all students. Although ambitious, a restructuring effort can be worth it in terms of overall school improvement and student achievement.

Clearly, we as a nation are not meeting the needs of our at-risk youth, and we need to rise to the challenge in new ways. The experiences of these two Lighthouse Districts can help. The following Practice Profile can guide the planning process by describing characteristics of each step of the process that will most likely lead to success.

THE "PRACTICE PROFILE" OF THE VERMONT LIGHTHOUSE DISTRICT PLANNING PROCESS

Introduction

The following pages attempt to capture the many components of the planning process the Vermont Lighthouse Districts used. This "Practice Profile," as it is called, is meant to give any district interested in better serving their at-risk youth a clear description of a process for planning comprehensive services.

During the first year of the Lighthouse Project, the steps each district took as it planned ways to better meet the needs of its at-risk students were observed and described. The resulting list of activities has been grouped into five major steps or components:

- convene a representative planning team;
- develop a shared vision of the Lighthouse Project and where and how it fits in the district;
- assess needs, including a scan of the larger environment;
- develop goals, objectives, and strategies for addressing problems of at-risk youth; pull these together into a plan; and
- communicate and build support for the Lighthouse Plan.

Furthermore, each activity is described three ways -- as it might be carried out in the "ideal," as an "acceptable" enactment, and as an "unacceptable" enactment. Although an activity labelled as an "unacceptable" enactment may seem at first to resemble the "ideal" activity, closer examination should reveal a lack of inclusiveness or comprehensiveness that causes the activity to miss the mark**. We hope that by describing each activity in this way, we have helped a planning team strive for the ideal while recognizing the alternatives and making the hard choices when necessary.

Taken together, the components of the Practice Profile define the parameters of the Lighthouse District Planning Process and enable an observer to "see" the process in action. Using the Profile, one can step outside -- or hover above -- a district engaged in the planning process and observe the various activities as they unfold.

**While "unacceptable" is a loaded term, it is used to demonstrate the parameters in defining the *Lighthouse District Planning Process* -- demonstrating in a concrete way what this process does encompass and what it does not.

Practice Profile of the Vermont Lighthouse District Planning Process

Vermont Lighthouse Districts were charged with creating a comprehensive plan for meeting the needs of all students at risk in their districts, using the following components:

COMPONENT 1: Convene a representative planning team.

Ideal	Acceptable	Unacceptable
1. Team membership is representative of entire school district (each building and all role groups), business, parents, and community agencies and groups.	1. Team membership is representative of school district (various roles, buildings) and at least one of the following groups: parents, business, community agencies.	1. Team membership is comprised only of school district members or almost all school district members with only one member from any other group.
2. Team is invested with authority to develop plan to take to school board and other groups; has authority to set own meetings; is in control of budget for planning process.	2. Team has authority to develop plan that can be taken to school board or other groups only with administrative approval; has authority to set own meetings; has major control over budget for planning process.	2. Team must clear all moves with administration and acts mostly in an advisory capacity.
3. Team meets as often as necessary, ideally twice a month, but at least monthly with other work to be accomplished between meetings. Planning cycle is at least 9 months.	3. Team meets at least one time a month and organizes other work to be accomplished between meetings. Planning cycle is at least 5 months.	3. Team meeting schedule is determined by someone other than team members. Team meets less than one time a month. Planning cycle is less than 4 months.
4. Team operates using democratic procedures for decision making that all members accept. Team reaches consensus easily.	4. Team operates using democratic procedures for decision making that all members accept.	4. Team operates in ill defined or unspecified ways to reach decisions or in ways not agreed upon by all members.
5. Team chooses leader who will serve as liaison for the team. Chair is effective facilitator.	5. Team chair is designated by administration or other authority who names initial team members. Team chair is accepted by team and functions as liaison with state. Chair is effective facilitator.	5. Any of the following: • There is no chair. • Chair is appointed but nonacceptable to majority of team members. • Chair is ineffective facilitator. • Chair does not function as liaison.

COMPONENT 2: Develop a shared vision of the Lighthouse Project and where and how it fits in the district.

Ideal	Acceptable	Unacceptable
1. Team begins with a framework that allows everything to be considered and discussed.	1. The project is set within a framework that has only a few "givens" (by administration) but allows for creative approaches.	1. The focus of the project is limited to one problem area or population that the district can add on a "program" as a solution.
2. Team develops consensus about what an ideal comprehensive and integrated approach will look like. The team successfully addresses how to integrate the approach into the overall district goals in a comprehensive, articulated way.	2. Team develops consensus about what a comprehensive and integrated approach will look like and particularly how it fits with other stated goals; looks at filling in gaps and getting better articulation between existing programs.	2. Team develops a separate approach for at-risk youth in isolation from the other school improvement efforts of the district; or extends a current program/ approach to include focus on selected population.

COMPONENT 3: Assess needs, including a scan of the larger environment.

Ideal	Acceptable	Unacceptable
1. Team assesses the local district to understand fully the nature and needs of the at-risk population; examines academic, attendance, discipline, free/reduced lunch, medical and other information.	1. Team gathers basic information on academic performance and one or two other variables to understand nature of at-risk population.	1. Team gathers information only from team members in an effort to understand nature of the at-risk population.
2. Team surveys the local district and community environments that impact on at-risk youth: • determine what to survey • gather information • sort for importance.	2. Team conducts search for already prepared information on local environment that will give information on potential resources for at-risk youth and/or trends/information that will affect this population.	2. Team relies on assumptions about the environment and does little other information gathering.
3. The plan takes form based on the results of the above activities and the actions called for reflect information gathered.	3. Team integrates findings into plan.	3. Team fails to integrate appropriate findings into plan.

COMPONENT 4: Identify goals, objectives and strategies for addressing the problems of at risk children and youth; develop an integrated plan.

Ideal	Acceptable	Unacceptable
1. Team articulates the set of principles on which goals, objectives, and strategies are based.	1. Team articulates the main principle on which goals, objectives, and strategies are based.	1. Team fails to articulate underlying principles.
2. Overall comprehensive goals for plan are consistent with district goals as a whole.	2. Overall comprehensive goals for plan do not conflict with other district goals.	2. Goals are developed in isolation of district goals or other priorities.
3. Team develops specific objectives that when accomplished would show better outcomes for students.	3. Team develops objectives without explicit attention to student outcomes.	3. Team develops objectives that are too general or too specific to be meaningful or ones with no demonstrable outcomes.
4. Team develops concrete, relevant, creative, and doable strategies involving all sectors of the community with a realistic time line for accomplishing the goals and objectives.	4. Team develops strategies with time line.	4. Team develops insufficient strategies (either in concept or number) with unrealistic or no time line.
5. Realistic implementation plan provides order to the goals and lays out an operating plan that includes indicators of successful achievement.	5. Implementation plan includes indicators of successful implementation but not necessarily of goal achievement.	5. Insufficient attention to implementation plan (no time lines or parameters) results in a plan that lacks clear indicators of successful attainment.

COMPONENT 5: Communicate and build support for the Lighthouse Plan.

Ideal	Acceptable	Unacceptable
1. Team builds in planned district/community awareness activities on issues related to at-risk youth to implement during planning process.	1. Team begins to get the word out about "at-risk" issues to district or community.	1. Team provides no communication about at-risk issues.
2. During process, team develops support for plan through open meetings or other input sessions, newspaper coverage, or other positive exposure.	2. Team checks plan with key stakeholders or others at large during planning process.	2. Plan is developed only within team.

3. Team communicates plan to state, local, and other officials and potentially interested parties and to community at large.	3. Team communicates plan to state, local, and other officials.	3. Team does not communicate plan to any of the necessary officials.
4. Plan is adopted by school board with budget attached.	4. Plan is endorsed/adopted by school board.	4. Team fails to win plan endorsement or fails to seek endorsement.
5. Team secures necessary waivers or interagency agreements necessary to begin plan as efficiently as possible.	5. Team does general follow up to begin plan.	5. Team does not conduct follow up, which will then stall implementation.
6. Team maintains all attempts to secure funds through state education channels; seeks funds for plan beyond school board or state education channels; pursues foundations, other grant applications, private industry.	6. Team continues everything possible to ensure state funding through a specific at-risk initiative or relates effort to other broad based change initiatives and brings effort under larger funding umbrella.	6. Team relies on state funds through a specific initiative only.